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SUBJECT: The Brockovich Report Takes on Greece

¶1. Summary. On September 21, Post began receiving thousands of messages from U.S. citizens requesting Post raise with the GoG the issue of industrial waste in the Asopos River, located 40km north of Athens. Econ identified an article on Erin BrockovichQs website from August 25 that highlighted the problem, (www.brockovichblog.com/2007/08/pollution) and claimed that the Mayor of Oinofyta had requested her help to address the issue internationally. Similar reports appeared in the local media soon thereafter, culminating in Minister of Environment, Town Planning and Public Works (PEXODE) George SoufliasQs public address on Sept 27th in which he said that the GoG would address Asopos clean up and regulation, and public health issues. Post will investigate and further report on the issue, as we expect a high-profile visit by Ms. Brockovich, and as the number of internet inquiries is over three thousand. End Summary.

¶2. Press reports and casual conversation with people on the street reveals wide ranging theories behind the Asopos River pollution, but the common thread is that of decades of use, either official or unofficial, as an industrial dumping ground. Since the late 1960s, upwards of 300 companies and industries set up in the region. While all were required to obtain permits and licenses, these were obtained at the local level and the credibility of the approval process has been subject of such public concern that Minister Souflias recently ordered that all permits be QreconsideredQ by local authorities.

¶3. Econ Off met with Secretary General Evangelos Baltas of the Ministry of Environment on October 1 to discuss the recent findings. In response to local activism and reports of significant increases in rates of disease and other medical issues, the GoG recently conducted tests on groundwater beneath the Asopos River. On August 10th, the first results came back indicating the presence of hexavalent chromium. Baltas stated that, to date, the Ministry has conducted seven additional water tests and twenty four inspections of local industries, identifying those industries whose activities relate to chromium. Baltas stated that as of September 27, intensive work to clean the area has been under way as well as efforts to stop further dumping and to punish those who have broken the law. According to Baltas, at least seven inspectors will remain on location, day and night, until the investigation is complete.

Chromium and the Local Area

¶4. Activist and recent media reports indicate the potential existence of nickel, cadmium, and arsenic in the

liquid waste dumped into the river, however the Ministry has focused on Chromium, and specifically Hexavalent Chromium. (Note: Hexavalent chromium is the same substance highlighted in the film QErin Brockovich.Q According to the national environment authority of Australia - <http://www.npi.gv.au/database/substance-info/profiles/24.html> - it has a high chronic toxicity to aquatic life, however no data is available on either the short-term or long-term effects of chromium to plants, birds, or land animals. End note.) Baltas explained that while he is unaware of any in-depth study on the effects of this pollution on the ecology in the area, he did not believe that the river was the primary source of local drinking water. He emphasized however, that while his Ministry is responsible for investigating the pollution, the Ministry of Health is responsible for the quality of drinking water.

15. Comment. Post plans a more detailed review on this issue following meeting with local officials and residents in the coming week, and is working on a draft response to the emails. The general stance from the GoG is that it was not aware of the problem until early August, when the first traces of chromium were identified. Multiple ministries are already involved, including Environment, Health, Agriculture, and Development, although to what degree is unclear. We will follow up with Ministries as appropriate. End Comment.

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